

# Iu Mien language

The **Iu Mien** language (Chinese: 勉語 or 勉方言; Thai: ภาษาอื๋อเมี่ยน) is the language spoken by the Iu Mien people in China (where they are considered a constituent group of the Yao peoples), Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and, more recently, the United States in diaspora. Like other Mien languages, it is tonal and monosyllabic.

Linguists in China consider the dialect spoken in Changdong, Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County, Guangxi to be the standard. This standard is also spoken by Iu Mien in the West, however, because most are refugees from Laos, their dialect incorporates influences from the Lao and Thai languages.<sup>[3]</sup>

Iu Mien has 78% lexical similarity with Kim Mun (Lanten), 70% with Biao-Jiao Mien, and 61% with Dzao Min.<sup>[3]</sup>

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Iu Mien	
Iu Mienh	
Pronunciation	<span>[ju˧ mjen˧]</span>
Native to	China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Communities in United States, and France.
Native speakers	(840,000 cited 1995–1999) <sup>[1]</sup>
Language family	<div>Hmong–Mien <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li> Mienic<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Mian–Jin<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Iu Mien</b></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></div>
Official status	
<div>Official language<span> </span>in</div>	<span><span><span></span></span><span> </span></span> China (in Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County)
Language codes	
<span>ISO 639-3</span>	ium
Glottolog	iumi1238 <span> </span> (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/iumi1238) <sup>[2]</sup>

## Geographic distribution

In China, Iu Mien is spoken in the following counties (Mao 2004:302-303).<sup>[4]</sup> There are 130,000 speakers in Hunan province (known as the *Xiangnan* 湘南 dialect), and 400,000 speakers in Guangxi, Yunnan, Guangdong, Guizhou, and Jiangxi provinces (known as the *Guangdian* 广滇 dialect).

- Guangxi: Yangshuo, Lingui, Guanyang, Ziyuan, Xing'an, Longsheng, Gongcheng, Yongfu, Luzhai, Lipu, Mengshen, Pingle, Jinxiu, Yishan, Rong'an, Rongshui, Luo Cheng, Huanjiang, Shanglin, Xincheng, Laibin, Baise, Napo, Lingyun, Tianlin, Cangwu, Hezhou, Fuchuan, Zhaoping, Fangcheng, Shangsi
- Guangdong: Yingde, Lechang, Shixing, Qujiang, Renhua, Wengyuan, Ruyuan, Liannan, Lianshan, Yangshan, Yangchun
- Yunnan: Hekou, Jinping, Honghe, Mengla, Malipo, Maguan, Gangnan, Funing, Wenshan
- Guizhou: Rongjiang, Congjiang, Sandu, Danzhai, Leishan, Zhenfeng, Luodian
- Jiangxi: Quannan, Shanggao
- Hunan: Jianghua, Yongzhou, Shuangpai, Xintian, Changning, Daoxian, Lanshan, Lingxian, Ningyuan, Jiangyong, Dong'an, Chenzhou, Zixing, Lingwu, Guiyang, Xinning, Yizhang, Chengbu, Qiyang, Chenxi; also in Longzha Township 龙渣瑶族乡, Yanling County

## Dialects

There are several known dialects of Iu Mien. Dialects vary by clan and geographic location.

In Vietnam, Dao people belonging to the Đại Bản, Tiểu Bản, Quần Chệt, Ô Gang, Cóc Ngáng, and Cóc Mùn subgroups speak Iu Mien dialects.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Phonology

### Consonants

There are 31 cited consonant phonemes in Iu Mien. A distinguishing feature of Iu Mien consonants is the presence of voiceless nasals and laterals.

Consonant phonemes of Iu Mien (unknown dialect)

	<u>Labial</u>		<u>Alveolar</u>		<u>Post-alveolar</u>	<u>Palatal</u>		<u>Velar</u>		<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Nasal</u>	<u>ṃ</u>	<u>m</u>	<u>ṇ</u>	<u>n</u>		<u>ɲ</u>	<u>ɲ</u>	<u>ŋ</u>	<u>ŋ</u>	
<u>Stop</u>	<u>p<sup>h</sup></u> <u>p</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>t<sup>h</sup></u> <u>t</u>	<u>d</u>				<u>k<sup>h</sup></u> <u>k</u>	<u>g</u>	<u>ʔ</u>
<u>Affricate</u>			<u>ts<sup>h</sup></u> <u>ts</u>	<u>dʒ</u>	<u>tɕ<sup>h</sup></u> <u>tɕ</u>	<u>dʒ</u>				
<u>Fricative</u>	<u>f</u>		<u>s</u>							<u>h</u>
<u>Approximant</u>							<u>j</u>	<u>w</u>		
<u>Lateral Appr.</u>					<u>ɭ</u>	<u>ɭ</u>				

1. The standard spelling system for Iu Mien does not represent the stop sounds in a way that corresponds to the IPA symbols, but instead uses e.g. ⟨t⟩, ⟨d⟩, and ⟨nd⟩ to represent /t<sup>h</sup>/, /t/, and /d/. This may stem from an attempt to model the Iu Mien spelling system on Pinyin (used to represent Mandarin Chinese), where ⟨t⟩ and ⟨d⟩ represent /t<sup>h</sup>/ and /t/. The Pinyin influence is also seen in the use of ⟨c⟩, ⟨z⟩, and ⟨nz⟩ to represent the alveolar affricates /tɕ<sup>h</sup>/, /tɕ/, and /dʒ/ and ⟨q⟩, ⟨j⟩, and ⟨nj⟩ for the postalveolar affricates /tɕ<sup>h</sup>/, /tɕ/, and /dʒ/. The use of ⟨ng⟩ to represent the velar nasal /ŋ/ means that it cannot also be used to represent /g/, as would be predicted; instead, ⟨nq⟩ is used.

2. According to Aumann and Chengqian,<sup>[6]</sup> in a certain Chinese dialect, the postalveolar affricates are instead palatal stops (/c<sup>h</sup>/, /c/, /ʃ/).
3. According to Daniel Bruhn,<sup>[7]</sup> the voiceless nasals are actually sequences [ḥm], [ḥn], [ḥŋ], and [ḥŋ̃] (i.e. a short nasalized /h/ followed by a voiced nasal), while the voiceless lateral is actually a voiceless lateral fricative [ɬ].
4. Bruhn also observed that younger-generation Iu Mien Americans were more likely to substitute the voiceless nasals and voiceless laterals with /h/ and the alveolo-palatal affricates with their corresponding palato-alveolar variants.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Onset

It appears that all single consonant phonemes except /ʔ/ can occur as the onset.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

## Coda

Unlike Hmong, which generally prohibits coda consonants, Iu Mien has seven single consonant phonemes that can take the coda position. These consonants are /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, [p̚], [t̚], [k̚], and /ʔ/. Some of the stops can only occur as final consonants when accompanied by certain tones; for example, /ʔ/ only occurs with the tone ⟨c⟩ or ⟨v⟩.

## Vowels

Monophthongs of Iu Mien (unknown dialect)

	<u>Front</u>	<u>Central</u>	<u>Back</u>
<u>High</u>	<u>i</u>		<u>u</u>
<u>High-mid</u>	<u>e</u>		<u>o</u>
<u>Low-mid</u>	<u>ɛ</u>	<u>ɜ</u>	
<u>Near-low</u>	<u>æ</u>	<u>ɐ</u>	
<u>Low</u>	<u>aː</u>		<u>ɒ</u>

Iu Mien vowels are represented in the Iu Mien United Script using combinations of the six letters, ⟨a⟩, ⟨e⟩, ⟨i⟩, ⟨o⟩, ⟨u⟩, and ⟨r⟩.

According to Bruhn,<sup>[7]</sup> the monophthongs are ⟨i⟩, ⟨u⟩, ⟨e⟩, ⟨o⟩, ⟨ai⟩, ⟨er⟩, ⟨ae⟩, ⟨a⟩, ⟨aa⟩, and ⟨or⟩. The diphthongs are ⟨ai⟩, ⟨aai⟩, ⟨au⟩, ⟨aau⟩, ⟨ei⟩, ⟨oi⟩, ⟨ou⟩, ⟨eu⟩. Furthermore, additional diphthongs and triphthongs can be formed from the aforementioned vowels through /i/- or /u/-on-gliding (having /i/ or /u/ before the vowel). Such vowels attested by Bruhn include ⟨ia⟩, ⟨iaa⟩, ⟨ie⟩, ⟨io⟩, ⟨iu⟩, ⟨ior⟩, ⟨iai⟩, ⟨iaai⟩, ⟨iau⟩, ⟨iaau⟩, ⟨iei⟩, ⟨iou⟩, ⟨ua⟩, ⟨uaa⟩, ⟨uae⟩, ⟨ue⟩, ⟨ui⟩, ⟨uo⟩, ⟨uai⟩, ⟨uaai⟩, and ⟨uei⟩.

The dialect studied by Bruhn, and described in the above table, has a phoneme /ɛ/ that does not have its own spelling, but is represented in various contexts either as ⟨e⟩ or ⟨ai⟩ (which are also used for /e/ and /aɪ/, respectively). In all cases where /ɛ/ is spelled ⟨e⟩, and nearly all cases where it is spelled ⟨ai⟩, it does not contrast with /e/ or /aɪ/, respectively, and can be viewed as an allophone of these sounds. The only potential

exception appears to be when occurring as a syllable final by itself, where it has an extremely restricted distribution, occurring only after the (alveolo-)palatal consonants /tɕ/, /dʑ/, and /ɲ/. The sound /ɛ/ may be a secondary development from /aɪ/ in this context, although Bruhn does not discuss this issue.

## Tones

Iu Mien is a tonal language with six observed tonemes.

In the Iu Mien United Script (the language's most common writing system), tones are not marked with diacritics; rather, a word's tone is indicated by a special marker letter at the end of the word. If a word lacks a marker, then it is to be pronounced with a middle tone.

IPA	Description	IMUS	Example	English meaning
˥/˥	High	v	maaiv	lopsided
˧˥	Mid, falling	h	maaih	to have
˧	Mid	∅	maai	basic tail of bird
˨/˨	Low	c	maaic	to sell
˨˨˥	Low, rising	x	maaix	nightmare
˨˨˨	Lower, longer, rise-fall	z	ma aiz	to buy

## Grammar

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Iu Mien is an analytic language and lacks inflection. It is also a monosyllabic language, with most of its lexicon consisting of one syllable.

The language follows a SVO word order. Some other syntactic properties include the following:

- Adjectives usually follow nouns.
- Question words like those meaning 'where' generally come at the end of sentences.
- The negative word *maiv* (often shortened to *mv*) may occur before verbs to negate them.
- A prevalence of contractions. Some words consist of a contracted syllable followed by an uncontracted second syllable (in IMUS, these syllables are separated by apostrophes). One such example is *ga'nyorc* ("spider"), a contraction of *gaeng-nyorc* ("insect-spider").

## Writing system

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In the past, the lack of an alphabet caused low rates of literacy amongst the Iu Mien speakers. It had been written with Chinese characters in China; however, this is extremely difficult for Iu Mien speakers from other countries such as Laos and from groups who now live in the West.

In an effort to address this, an Iu Mien Unified Script was created in 1984 using the Latin script, based on an earlier orthography developed in China.<sup>[10]</sup> Unlike the Vietnamese language, this alphabet does not use any diacritics to distinguish tones or different vowel sounds, and only uses the 26 letters of the ISO basic Latin alphabet. This orthography distinguishes 30 initials, 128 finals, and eight tones. Hyphens are used to link adjectives with the nouns they modify. The alphabet is similar to the RPA used to write the Hmong language and the Hanyu Pinyin transcription scheme used for Chinese.

## IMUS spelling-to-sound correspondences

Consonants			Vowels			Tones		
Spelling	IPA	Example	Spelling	IPA	Example	Spelling	IPA	Example
hm	/m̥/	<b>hm</b> ien ('face')	a	/e/	<b>ja</b> pv ('to cut with scissors')	v	/ɿ/, /ɨ/	maa <b>iv</b> ('lopsided')
m	/m/	<b>ma</b> iv ('not'), <b>hna</b> mv	aa	/a/	<b>ma</b> a ('mother')	h	/ɤ/	maa <b>ih</b> ('to have')
hn	/n̥/	<b>hno</b> i ('day')	aai	/aːɪ/	<b>la</b> ai ('final')	∅	/ɤ/	maa <i>i</i> ('basic tail of bird')
n	/n/	<b>nie</b> ('soil'), <b>bun</b> ('give')	aa <u>u</u>	/aːʊ/	<b>sa</b> au ('to socialize')	c	/ɿ/, /ɨ/	maa <b>ic</b> ('to sell')
hny	/ɲ̥/	<b>hny</b> angx ('year')	ae	/æ/	<b>da</b> e ('father')	x	/ɿ/	maa <b>ix</b> ('nightmare')
ny	/ɲ/	<b>nye</b> i ('mine')	ai	/aɪ/	<b>la</b> i ('vegetable')	z	/ɿ/, /ɨ/	maa <b>iz</b> ('to buy')
hng	/ŋ̥/	<b>hng</b> ongx ('dumb')	au	/aʊ/	<b>nd</b> au ('ground')			
ng	/ŋ/	<b>ng</b> ongh ('cow'), <b>zaang</b> z ('elephant')	e	/e/	<b>he</b> h ('shoe')			
p	/pʰ/	<b>po</b> rng ('shovel')	ei	/ɛɪ/	<b>me</b> ih ('you')			
b	/p/	<b>be</b> nx ('to become')	er	/ɜ/	<b>se</b> rn (a raw meat dish)			
mb	/b/	<b>mb</b> uo ('us')	eu	/ɜo/	<b>be</b> u ('to wrap')			
t	/tʰ/	<b>to</b> v ('to beg')	i	/i/	<b>i</b> ('two')			
d	/t/	<b>da</b> 'nyeic ('second')	o	/o/	<b>go</b> ('far')			
nd	/d/	<b>nd</b> au ('ground')	oi	/oɪ/	<b>o</b> ix ('like')			
k	/kʰ/	<b>ko</b> rqv ('gourd')	or	/ɔ/	<b>po</b> rng ('shovel')			
g	/k/	<b>ga</b> nh ('oneself')	ou	/əʊ/	<b>so</b> u ('book')			
nq	/g/	<b>nqa</b> ang ('rear')	u	/u/	<b>uv</b> ('gestures')			
q (syllable-final)	/ʔ/	zu <b>q</b> c ('must')						
c	/t͡sʰ/	<b>co</b> ng h ('from')						
z	/t͡s/	<b>zi</b> ng h ('city wall')						
nz	/d͡z/	<b>nza</b> ngc ('character')						
q (syllable-initial)	/t͡ɕʰ/	<b>qa</b> m ('hug')						
j	/t͡ɕ/	<b>ja</b> ix ('penis')						
nj	/d͡ʒ/	<b>nji</b> uv ('scissors')						
f	/f/	<b>fi</b> ngx						

		('surname')
s	/s/	siang ('new')
h	/h/	hoqc ('learn')
y	/j/	yie ('I')
w	/w/	wetv ('dig')
hl	/ɬ/	hlo ('big')
l	/l/	laengz (accept)

## Films

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The following films feature the Iu Mien language:

- 2003 - *Death of a Shaman* (<https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/deathofashaman/>). Directed by Richard Hall; produced by Fahm Fong Saeyang.
- 2010 - "Siang-Caux Mienh" (<http://www.hilltribesmediaministries.webs.com/>). A story of a very irresponsible family man, alcoholic, and drug addict. He likes his bad friends but he doesn't love his family. But as he starts paying his mistakes, has become a turning point in his life.
- 2011 - "Mborqv Jaax Ciangv" (<http://www.hilltribesmediaministries.webs.com/>). A moving family friendly movie.

## Notes

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1. Iu Mien (<https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/ium/>) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "Iu Mien" (<http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/iumi1238>). *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.
3. Ethnologue report for language code:ium ([http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=ium](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=ium))
4. 毛宗武, 李云兵 / Mao Zongwu, Li Yunbing. 1997. 巴哼语研究 / Baheng yu yan jiu (A Study of Baheng [Pa-Hng]). Shanghai: 上海远东出版社 / Shanghai yuan dong chu ban she.
5. Phan Hữu Dật & Hoàng Hoa Toàn. 1998. "Về vấn đề xác minh tên gọi và phân loại các ngành Dao Tuyên Quang." In Phan Hữu Dật (ed). *Một số vấn đề về dân tộc học Việt Nam*, p.483-567. Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Đại Học Quốc Gia Hà Nội. [Comparative word list of 9 Dao dialects in Tuyên Quang Province from p. 524-545]
6. Aumann, Greg; Chengqian, Pan (2004). *Report on the Iu Mien—Chinese—English Dictionary Project* ([https://web.archive.org/web/20040821144929/http://crcl.th.net/sealex/Aumann\\_IuMienDict.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20040821144929/http://crcl.th.net/sealex/Aumann_IuMienDict.pdf)) (PDF). Asian Lexicography Conference, Chiangmai 24–26th May 2004. Archived from the original ([http://crcl.th.net/sealex/Aumann\\_IuMienDict.pdf](http://crcl.th.net/sealex/Aumann_IuMienDict.pdf)) (PDF) on 2004-08-21.
7. Bruhn, Daniel (27 August 2007), *The Phonetic Inventory of Iu-Mien* ([http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~dwbruhn/dwbruhn\\_iu-mien.pdf](http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/~dwbruhn/dwbruhn_iu-mien.pdf)) (PDF)
8. *mienh.net online lesson - Initial Consonants* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20051101220225/http://mienh.net/language/consonants.html>), archived from the original (<http://mienh.net/language/consonants.html>) on 2005-11-01
9. Zhou 2003, p. 259
10. [1] (<http://www.iumien.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=1&page=2>)

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- [http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples\\_and\\_places/people\\_groups/mien\\_of\\_thailand](http://www.omf.org/omf/us/peoples_and_places/people_groups/mien_of_thailand)

## Dissertations

- Court, Christopher (1985). *Fundamentals of Iu Mien (Yao) grammar* (<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4bt0n84j>) (Ph.D. thesis). University of California, Berkeley.
- Arisawa, Tatsuro Daniel (2016). *An Iu Mien grammar: a tool for language documentation and revitalisation* (Ph.D. thesis). La Trobe University. [hdl:1959.9/561960](https://hdl.handle.net/1959.9/561960) (<https://hdl.handle.net/1959.9/561960>).

## Further reading

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- David Saechao. 2018-2019. *From Mountains to Skyscrapers: The Journey of the Iu Mien*. 2nd ed.

## External links

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- An Online Blog By Iu Mien Americans (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190506205836/http://imkien.com/>)
- Mienh.net Language (<https://web.archive.org/web/20110723210414/http://mienh.net/language/language.html>)
- The Iu-Mien Community Online (<http://www.iumien.com/>)
- Mien Kingdom - Community Forum (<https://web.archive.org/web/20150801211529/http://mienkingdom.com/>)
- [2] (<http://www.smithpanh.com>)

- [OLAC resources in and about the lu Mien language \(http://www.language-archives.org/language/ium\)](http://www.language-archives.org/language/ium)
  - [World Atlas of Language Structures entry \(http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals\\_code\\_mie\)](http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals_code_mie)
  - [LearnMien.com \(http://www.learnmien.com/\)](http://www.learnmien.com/)
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